



Grief and Bereavement

06-05-19



Description:

This webinar looks at grief and bereavement and how one can pastorally and compassionately respond to persons experiencing grief after a loss. In particular, it describes the unique challenges of the grief process that affect persons who are incarcerated as well as persons who have been victims of crime.

Presenters:

The presenters are:

Fr. George Williams, SJ - Fr. George is a Catholic Chaplain at San Quentin State Prison in California and holds a doctorate in criminology from Northeastern University.

Melissa Kelley, Ph.D. - Dr. Kelley has several years of clinical-pastoral experience and is an associate professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling and the faculty director of the M.Div. program at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.

Transcription:

Father George: Hi, welcome to our next webinar for the Catholic prison ministries coalition. I am Williams, and I'm here today with Dr. Melissa Kelly. She teaches at the Boston college school of theology and ministry. Also, Melissa and I are colleagues from BC, and we used to teach a prison ministry course together when I was working in Massachusetts. The Catholic Prison Ministry Coalition (CPMC) started about a year ago. We decided that we needed something grassroots to help people doing this ministry or interested in Catholic prison ministry. We wanted to provide the opportunity to meet, network, and to have resources to do their job and learn about what, what happens in jail and prison ministry. I know from my experience, it's a very steep learning curve. So we want to make sure we have the resources available for everyone there. To that end, where we have, we have a new website that will go active in September.

Father George: it will be CatholicPrisonMinistries.org. We'll have more information, and we'll send that out as we get closer. But that will hopefully be your go-to place for all the kinds of information you want. And, just so you know, our, our mission statement is, the Catholic person ministries coalition promotes Catholic ministry to all those affected by incarceration. That means not just prisoners but families, victims of crime, staff, and prisons. Our goal is to recruit, train, support, and empower those called to minister with the poor and marginalized. We hope to create a more just and merciful criminal justice system, closely aligned with the ministry of the church and the teachings and example of Pope Francis. CPMC will create opportunities to share resources and best practices to strengthen the church's mission to advance restorative justice that oppose the dignity of every human person.

Father George: So today, we're talking about grief and bereavement. We will discuss how they relate to ministry with those who are incarcerated as well, of course, to their families and staff. And I suppose if we get to it, victims of crime as well. Melissa Kelly, that's her area of expertise. And so, I'm going to ask Melissa to give us a brief introduction to what we're talking about when we're talking about grief and bereavement. So, Melissa, welcome and that to have you with us today. Thank you for taking the time to share with us.

Dr. Kelly: Thank you, George. It's my pleasure to join you and hello to everybody who's participating with us. It occurs to me, George, maybe the first thing to say is what is the difference between grief and bereavement. And, some people use those terms interchangeably, but I, I like to distinguish between them as, as some people do. Bereavement means the state of being deprived of someone being bereft. So, when there's a death, I am bereaved of whoever it is who has died. But it doesn't presume that I have a particular response. You know, I could have a significant death, and it may not affect me profoundly before all kinds of reasons. You know, maybe I'm glad that this person is no longer suffering, et cetera. Grief, on the other hand, is I think we can understand it as the distress in response to a significant loss. So, when I am experiencing distress, that is what we mean by grief. And it can look a lot of different ways. For some people, their grief is primarily

emotional. You know, they may do a lot of crying, they may feel very depressed. For others, it may not be, maybe, more cognitive. They may be trying to figure out what's happened? What does this mean? And how do I make sense of this? But if there is distress following a significant loss, that's what we can understand by grief. Go ahead.

Father George: And I'm before I forget. For those who are participating live, if you go to the bottom of your screen, you'll see a box for questions. Feel free to open that box and to write down any questions or comments you have because we'd like to have this be a conversation today. And also, we would like to be able to address specific questions and concerns that our listeners have when dealing with the issues around grief and bereavement in their prison and jail ministry. So, any more to say about grief before I launch into my spiel.

Dr. Kelly: Well, I thought maybe I would say just a word about, you know, what are the many ways that loss can occur very often we tend to believe that grief is a response to death. And of course, it can be, but it isn't always, you know, some people make, as I said, some people may experience a death that isn't especially distressing to them. So, I thought, let me go to share that. I would offer this slide of types of loss. Did that come up, Yes? Okay. So, this is the work of Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson. Both pastoral writers. One of their books, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*, is an old classic book. But this is one of the pieces that I think is most helpful about it. They identify six areas in which loss can occur.

Dr. Kelly: And there, of course, could be others. And there also can be tremendous overlap among all these categories. But for instance, material loss, and I'm thinking about incarceration when someone is incarcerated and lose perhaps their home, their possessions, their car, their money. These are tremendous material losses. They also may experience relationship loss through divorce, through death, but also from long separations, from ruptured friendships, from strained relationships. Besides, role loss, you know, when somebody loses their job or retires, even if they choose to retire, it can still be experienced as a loss to lose that role. When it comes to being incarcerated, you can't be with your kids every day or help them with their homework or discipline. What happens to your sense of your role as a parent? A systemic loss means the loss that an entire system or organization can go through.

Dr. Kelly: So, for instance, what a family would experience when someone's incarcerated. All in the family experience loss. Systemic loss is what a neighborhood could go through when a famous landmark is torn down or when the last mom and pop shop closes.

A functional loss means a loss to any part of our physical functioning. So serious illness, stroke, you know, some sort of chronic disease that affects my physical functioning. I was thinking today about what that would mean in terms of incarceration. And I was thinking about the losses experienced

when one is incarcerated. You can't even get fresh air when you feel like it. You have to eat when it's time to eat, not when you're hungry. The body is affected in so many ways.

And then finally there is psychic loss by which Mitchell and Anderson mean the loss within our psyche. Psychic loss is the loss of a way of thinking about ourselves. One loses a way of understanding how life works, such as in the loss of a dream. This kind of loss is often the most difficult to sort out or to notice in ourselves and other people because it's all, it's within our psyche. But any of these losses could be a source of grief for people. And again, some experiences, maybe such as incarceration, could tap into many or all of these.

Father George: Right. And one other comment too. I noticed several more people had joined us since we began. And if you have questions, feel free to type any questions or comments in the chat area. Melissa and I will see them, and we can address them right away. As you're speaking, I'm thinking about the men and women that I work within the prison. They often experience layer upon layer of loss, indeed the loss of freedom. Still, then once they're in there, it's prevalent for people to start losing more connection with family members and, people die. And one of the saddest things I to do is notify people of deaths or serious illnesses in their families, which brings about often, it seems to trigger a lot of shame. And the men and women in prison, they often feel like they're guilty. And so, I'm curious. How would you approach the issue of someone blaming themselves or feeling guilt or shame around not being there for a loved one?

Dr. Kelly: That leads me to something else that I wanted to mention.

In some of the newer work being done on grief now, we understand more and more about meaning making. In the past, if you asked people on the street about grief, many people would mention something about stages of grief, stage theory. We understand now that for many people, that's not really what grief is.

What it seems to touch for many people is the area of meaning-making. What does it mean that I'm going through this loss? What does my future look like? You know, where is the hope for my life given that this has happened? And so when I think about something like shame or guilt, I'm not there for my family. One of the ways to think about not being able to be there for the family is, in this area of meaning-making, that's a source of grief. I cannot be for my child, the parent I want to be. And therefore, what does that mean for my child, and what does it mean for me? What does it mean for my life? So engaging with people in that area, I think it is just a critical thing to do. And I believe chaplains, prison ministers are better able to do that than most folks.

Dr. Kelly: Okay. I'll stop there for a moment. Tell me what you think.

Father George: Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense because I think a lot of people are grappling with trying to make meaning of the situation that they are in prison. And, you know, the system itself reinforces a sense of failure and shame and guilt. And so, it is, which adds, I think, to just the complexity of what they are going through. So it's, it's bad enough if you're losing a parent. But when you feel like your behavior is the reason that you could not be there for them in their time of need, it's excruciatingly painful. And I remember hearing about complex grief, what that is, and even the idea that somehow we don't all grieve in the same way. People have different reactions. How do we know what is okay?

Father George: For what do we look? Are there things that we should be concerned about if someone is showing grief that is going beyond what we can handle?

Father George: We might need to bring in mental health care.

Dr. Kelly: So this raises several important questions. The first is, yes, grief is very particular, as I was saying about stage theory. There is often an assumption in the culture that everybody grieves the same way, or that everybody should grieve the same way. First, there's denial, and then there's anger, then there's bargaining, et cetera.

Dr. Kelly: We know now that grief is very particular, and as I was saying at the beginning, too, for some people, grief is primarily emotional. They'll do a lot of crying. They want to talk about the loss quite a lot for others. And men in this culture are socialized, not to be emotional grievers for others, grief is very, active or it's very cognitive. People are thinking a lot about what's happened, or they're working through their grief sometimes. So, grief is very particular. Thus, the very first thing I think any helper needs to do is check their assumptions. You know, if this person doesn't look to me like they're grieving correctly, how do I think about that Because I may be assuming their grief should look a certain way. But what you are also saying to George is sometimes grief is, does not run a course where it is going to move toward more significant healing over time.

So, there are two things to think about there. First of all, sometimes people are experiencing both grief and trauma, and there's more work being done recently in the area of traumatic bereavement. Bereavement is grief that is laced with trauma.

Dr. Kelly: And that's not going to run the usual course. The grief often runs because there's also trauma. Grief and trauma are not the same things. So, where we sense that this person has experienced trauma as well, they need help from a trauma specialist. Often people cannot get to the grief and do the grieving that they may want to do until they have dealt with the trauma.

Father George: That's a good point there. I was thinking in terms of what often happens with people who are incarcerated. Their current grief or their current situation triggers memories of trauma and loss that happened to them in the past. So, I didn't want to interrupt you, but it made me think of that. How can we be more attentive to those experiences?

Dr. Kelly: You are right! That experience is not uncommon. If people have not had the opportunity or the support to do the grieving that they've needed to do, a recent loss can stimulate all those prior losses. When one loss is compounded on top of another, such as happens in the case of incarceration, somebody could be living in chronic grief without the support they need. So, I think, the first thing that we can all do is first of all, just be sensitive to how omnipresent grief often is. And I would imagine, of course, you know, much better than I. Still, I would believe in the case of incarceration that's almost a given that is omnipresent. And second, because we often associate grief with death. We don't think of all those other categories of grief that the research I discussed earlier has revealed. We sometimes don't recognize our grief unless a death is involved. So being sensitive as a caregiver, we should ask, when appropriate: "You know, it sounds like there's been quite a lot of loss for you. I am wondering if you have been experiencing anything that feels like grief or sorrow or sadness about that?" Then allow a person some time and space to consider those questions.

Father George: How about dealing with different cultures I mean, I know from the dominant culture, and there's a certain way that I've been socialized to expressing my grief, but if I'm working with people who come from another culture, how can I be sensitive to some of those patterns are there, is there any research that shows that people from different cultures have different ways of manifesting and expect, expressing grief than people in the dominant culture

Dr. Kelly: Oh yeah. There's tremendous cultural variation in terms of how people understand grief and then how people may express grief, and it runs the gamut. So, you know, sometimes people may feel like, and it may be related to gender, it may not, but sometimes people feel like it's not okay to express grief. You know, I need to be stoic. Others may feel like they're supposed to manifest grief. They do so in many ways, even if they're not especially distressed internally. So, in short, there are many variations. Rather than assuming, we should just ask people: "In your culture, what are your understandings about how grief is supposed to be handled or expressed? With what are you comfortable?"

Father George: Are there any resources that you know of that deals specifically say with African-American, expression of grief or experiences of grief? I realize that in the African-American community, there are all kinds of levels of grief coming from the legacy of slavery and oppression.

This experience is also true for Latinos and Latinas. Is there material out there that people can refer to if they haven't had direct experience growing up in those cultures

Dr. Kelly: Yeah, fortunately, there is more and more that's being done on cultural perspectives on grief. I would suggest if people are interested in this, in anything having to do with grief, that they go to the website of the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC). The website is www.adec.org. It is an excellent national organization that's doing all the most current work in grief, death, and dying. And they have great resources. Members of ADEC have developed many of the better materials being done now on grief and culture. So that would be a great one-stop-shop to find support.

Father George: And what does is that association called again?

Dr. Kelly: The Association for Death Education and Counseling. And the website is a www.adeck.org.

Father George: Great. Thank you. Well, we have one comment so far, and the person writes, prisoners have an automatic defense mode, which prison forces upon them just to survive in prison. Trauma adds to this defense or makes it hard to assist. What are the steps aside from being there to support them better as they experience grief? It's funny, I just was doing a training last week, and this came up.

While I have worked with women prisoners, I now deal mostly with men prisoners. There are only men at San Quentin. Sometimes, when I've had to deliver bad news to prisoners, especially about deaths and families, the men will react with a stunning sort of shock and almost numb reaction. At that point, I feel like they just need to process.

Father George: And so my, my usual pattern is I will try to take them somewhere where it's quiet and dignified and let them sit down and tell them the news and then sit with them a little bit, but not say anything or much. And then give them some time, provide them with an hour or two to process. They go back to their cell, or they can go to the yard out, whatever they feel comfortable doing, and then go back in an hour or two. And by that point, it's sunk in, and they've gone through a couple, processes where they're able to start, relating to or talking about it. But I feel like my, to answer the person's question there, I think prison does tend to force them into a particular defensive mode. Also, I think men, in our culture, don't want to cry or show emotion. For a lot of men, it's shameful

to cry or to show those kinds of emotions that would be perceived as weak emotions. Yet, I find that invariably if they have an hour or two to process, they're able to access those feelings. Do you have any comments on that, Melissa?

Dr. Kelly: Well, that sounds like a constructive and sensitive way to proceed. I can, I can well imagine not, not from having done the work, but I can well imagine that.

Dr. Kelly: Being vulnerable, being made vulnerable through grief is not ideal in a prison setting. In prison, people have to maintain a certain defensive posture just to survive. So being able to offer them some privacy, someplace where they can both experience it and then pull it back together again. That sounds like a great way to go.

Father George: Well, the key in such a situation is the degree it's possible in the jail or the prison in which you're working. First of all, I try to put myself in their place. I ask myself: How would I want to be treated in this situation? So, I want to make sure that the person is given privacy and dignity. And so, one doesn't want to tell somebody this news in a hallway or through the doors of their cell. You want to have correction officers take them out of their cell and bring them to a place where they can sit down and talk. But you know, you have to adapt and sometimes that's not possible. So, you have to tell them through the door of a cell if they're in solitary or something.

Father George: And, and I guess in that case, you just have to do the best you can to be compassionate. Another thing I wanted to bring up is, and again, if people have comments or questions, please feel free to continue asking. Somebody just wrote, how do you help the prisoner who has been a stranger through the guilt and shame they express upon hearing about the death of a loved one. I'm going to give that one to you first and then I'll give my response. But it's a great question. Do you see it there, Melissa? Can you reread it, George? It's on the Questions and Answer section of the webpage was cut off a little bit.

How do you help the prisoner who has been estranged through the guilt and shame? How do you help them to express their grief upon hearing about the death of a loved one that they have been unable to have contact with for some time?

Dr. Kelly: Well, that seems to me to be an unfortunate situation. Even folks who are not incarcerated sometimes experience that. When someone dies, and someone has been estranged, distant from them or even angry with them, that's a challenging situation. It comes back to that question of meaning. What do I make of this? It's too late now. You know, regret all of that, which is an unfortunate thing. One of the areas in contemporary grief work that I think is helpful is the area of continuing bonds. Dennis Kloss and some other researchers are demonstrating through research something that a lot of us have kind of known by just talking with people over the years. That when there's a death, not everyone, but many people will say that they feel that their connection with that person continues in some way.

Dr. Kelly: Maybe because they believe in the afterlife, maybe because they feel the person is still with them in some way. Perhaps they feel they now have an opportunity to embody something of that person as a way of honoring them. But this idea of continuing bonds I think is a source potentially of great hope for people that even when someone has died, and we don't want to sugar coat that and say, Oh, but they're still with you. And so, therefore, you shouldn't feel guilt or shame. You know, we have to take what people tell us seriously. Even when there's a death, that doesn't necessarily mean the relationship is over. And sometimes it's after death, have people feel the freedom to engage, to talk with this person in ways they never could when, when the person was alive. So, with time and with sensitivity, I think that's an area where people could find some solace and some hope. There are ways that they could make amends, that they could express their regret, their remorse even after death.

Father George: Yeah. And you know, I think one of the things we have in our Catholic tradition is this notion of the communion of saints - that we are connected to our loved ones still after death. And so without sugarcoating or spiritualizing it, this is a reality of our faith. They are still alive in Christ. We're always connected to them. I find that reassuring those I minister to of this is very helpful.

And also, I have experienced that through many of the prisoners where it's not too late. It's, you know, we're still connected. Love doesn't die. And so, healing and forgiveness and all those things can always happen - even though the person may have been completely estranged from them all their lives. And unfortunately, that's more often the case than not with many of the prisoners, especially the men, their fathers. So many of the men that I work with have had complicated, difficult relationships with their fathers, if they had any relationship at all. And so, in a way, if it's not possible for the healing to continue after the person has passed, then I don't think we have too much help to offer. Fortunately, I think we do have hope because of our faith.

Dr. Kelly: That's right. Oh, I'm sorry. And I'll just add one thing. I think for some people there's, it sounds strange. Still, there's greater hope for a good connection after death because the human connection may have been so, difficult or fraught or, or painful. But now it's a new day.

Father George: Yeah. And often I think because many of the men and women that I worked with, you know, the family members, often they die from overdoses or violence or even suicide. Suicides are a particularly tricky case. Do you have any insight or reflections to share on how to deal with people who are survivors of suicide? Experiencing or learning about suicides is especially painful for those who are incarcerated. It's honestly difficult for anyone. What advice do you have for dealing with the family of a prisoner who committed suicide? Can you share any help? It's a horrible situation.

Dr. Kelly: Well, that's an awful experience. So, you mean when the person incarcerated loses a loved one to suicide? Or also when a prisoner commits or dies by suicide, and you're trying to support the family? So often for survivors of suicide, it's a case of traumatic bereavement. The circumstances of death cause the reality of losing someone by suicide to rise to the level of trauma for most people, possibly. So that's a case where people may need more than grief support. They may need some professional trauma response. But I also think there are many critical helpful organizations out there now for survivors of suicide—for example, the American Association of Suicidology (see www.suidology.org.) There are many.

And I also think that many Catholics still have false assumptions about what current Catholic teaching is about suicide. For example, many believe that the loved one is in hell or that they can't have a church funeral. They misunderstand contemporary church teaching. I think that it's important to relieve people's minds. The catechism, for instance, teaches that the church prays for those who have died by suicide. We trust in, in a merciful God. So, not to despair of our loved one who's died by suicide, but then also, providing probably extra support for those folks because it's, it often does, involve trauma.

Father George: Yeah. That's good. Thank you. Someone asks the question or makes a comment here; grief becomes additive when a prisoner cannot attend a funeral. Do you have any examples for a verbal or ritual or some other method that the chaplain could provide the prisoner as their ceremony to say goodbye? That's a great comment and question. My experience has been that more often than not, it's impossible to go to the funeral. The people in California, the prisoner's family can pay for everything. Still, it costs about \$10,000 because they have to pay for the correction officers. There isn't transportation. So, I've never actually seen it happen. But I think what I'm, what I generally do after I go back after the person's processed for an hour or so. I'll then offer to pray with them and for the person and their family. Then I'll invite them to come to our Mass. We can either offer the Mass for the family and the deceased person or include them in the prayers. So, we find a way to invite them to come to our services and, and, and, you know, pray with them there or pray with them individually. I like the idea of doing some kind of ritual. Do you have any thoughts about what that would look like, Melissa? I ask because I've never done that, but it sounds like an excellent idea.

Dr. Kelly: Well, I often think the most meaningful rituals are the ones that you've just named: prayer in a community - especially the Mass. But I'm also thinking of an experience that I heard, not in a prison setting. Still, a woman I know was chaplain to a man who quite ill and couldn't get to get to the funeral. I forget the details, but he wanted to see his family member's burial site one more time before he died and couldn't get there. It wasn't possible. She led him in a guided reflection visualization on what it would be like to be there at someone's gravesite. And she said it was incredibly helpful to him. I believe something like that would be possible in a prison setting as well. Guide people visually to imagine that they have been there or to imagine that they're able to pray at the burial site, et cetera.

Father George: Yeah, that's a great idea. I have also suggested another possibility for the men. Even if they can't physically be there for the service, they can write something that could be either read as a eulogy or placed in the coffin with a loved one. I also encourage them to ask the family to take pictures of the funeral or at the gravesite.

Sometimes, especially if a person's a lifer, that's as close as they're going to be able to get physically. And then, given your situation, if you or your volunteers are allowed, it's helpful to accompany family members to the service. As long as the department gives permission, supporting his or her family on the outside is an excellent way to show support for the prisoner.

Father George: And my experience in the past has been when I was, I did that more in Boston because it was a much closer-knit community and smaller geographic area. But it always meant an awful lot to the family members. And to the friends of the, of the, of the prisoner and the deceased.

So, I kind of want to shift gears a little bit. And we'll come back to this issue if there are more comments on dealing with the experience of prisoners and detainees of grief. But I also want to talk about the victims of crime and how we might consider ways of helping them deal with grief. In my experience, many people who have been victimized by crime, especially victims of murder cases, carry around a tremendous amount of anger. The anger they experience gets in the way of their processing and healing. Do you have any thoughts on that, Melissa?

Dr. Kelly: How to help people move, continue to kind of move on in their life after, after they've been victims of crime. Yes.

Not to be too repetitive, but again, that may touch on trauma. People may need some sort of professional trauma support. But I also think that can be one of the places where the new, the newer work in grief on narrative and narrative disruption might be helpful. Some constructivist psychologists, including Robert Niemeyer and others, are helping us think about the fact that most of us think about our lives in terms of a story. You know, we may not do it concretely every day, but, you know, when we're asked about our life story, that's often even that phrase. Sometimes issues, we tend to understand our own life experience in terms of a story like our lives have a plot. There was a beginning, you know, events have occurred, there's the present, there are characters, major characters, minor characters, protagonists, antagonists.

Dr. Kelly: We often think of our lives as having themes, you know, so, and, and this seems to be cross-cultural. People universally seem to think about their lives in terms of stories. And what that also means is we all have a sense of the unfolding story we want to live. You know, it may not be all fleshed out, but if somebody asks me, you know, where do you want to be in five years or ten years, I have clear ideas about that. And most of us do. So when something awful happens, like crime, like being the victim of a crime, one of the ways we could think about that, it's not the only way. Still, we could think about that as an experience of what robber Niemeyer calls narrative disruption. The story I thought I was living has now been interrupted. And the disruption may be higher or lesser in degree, depending on all kinds of things.

Dr. Kelly: But for some people, it's almost like, you know, here's the book of my life. This awful thing has happened. It's like pages have been ripped out of the book of my life. And so, for some people, it may even mean the unfolding story makes no sense anymore. We all know people who are struggling with this. You hear them say things like: "This doesn't make any sense" or "I don't know how to make sense out of this."

Part of what that suggests is people are experiencing narrative disruption. They don't know what it all means because story and meaning are intertwined. So, for victims of crime, it may be that one of the areas that could help them think about what this has meant for their story. And then if somebody says, "What a story! The future I thought I was going to live is impossible. Now how, how do I go on after this. Then we have some sense that it might be helpful to talk with people about the story, our personal story, but also the story writ large. What is it that hasn't changed? What is it that I can count on in terms of my future even though this has happened?

Father George: Good. Thank you. And I'm, I've gotten a couple of comments, as you were talking that people have found that description you gave very, very helpful as I just did. You know, one of the things that we do have to be aware of is that as chaplains in jails and prisons, while we focus on the prisoners themselves. We invariably run into contact with family members and, and also victims of crime. We have to be sensitive to that. And we may not be able to reach out to the specific victims of the prisoners with whom we're dealing. But we don't have to do that ourselves. We can set up having volunteers or people in our church or parish. That's a separate ministry that the church needs to step up and do more. It is another area of ministry that we have not addressed well.

Father George: But it's crucial. And I say this; I'm a little biased because I did my dissertation on this. Still the area of working with staff, often I think when we walk into the prison we, we come into an adversarial situation where we're there to help the prisoners. And it seems like, you know, the guards go out of their way to make it hard for us. But the reality is, we need to be attentive to the correctional officers, the jail officers, and the non-uniform staff. They also experience forms of daily

traumatization from being in prison. They, too, have losses in their own lives. And so any, any suggestions on how, you think working with police officers or correctional officers, and the types of losses that they experienced that we could address that as chaplains. Any thoughts, Melissa?

Dr. Kelly: Well, I have often found, again, that most of us tend to have a minimal understanding of loss. We think it has to do with death or maybe something like divorce. Most of us don't notice sort of the daily constancy of loss in our lives and everybody else's lives. So sometimes just naming that for folks or creating space where people could reflect on that together. I don't know whether it's even possible in any prison setting to have a gathering with some of the staff or correctional officers to help them to talk about that sort of thing. And you know, they're not told, "Oh, I bet you're experiencing this loss." Still, I was thinking about this, George, " Does working in a prison setting change someone's personality over time? Can they change for the better in some ways? These are just some of the factors that people are having to negotiate and deal with every single day. What does that do to one's basic temperament or personality Like would there ever be opportunities where people could reflect on that

Father George: Yeah. Well, you know, that's a good point. And I, there's plenty of research that suggests that yes, the immediate environment does have a kind of a negative effect on people's personality development. The correctional officer culture lends itself to this sort of macho lack of expression or any form of weakness. People who are attracted to law enforcement, whether they're police or correction officers, tend to see themselves as people who are there to protect other people. It's a very altruistic motivation and something that I admire. But with that comes a sense that if they show weakness somehow, they're failing. They have to be strong all the time, and they're on their internal correction. Officer culture reinforces that. So, while you may not be able to gather officers at work, it is vital to be aware of the things that are going on in their lives.

Father George: You know, suicide among correction officers is one of the highest occupational hazards. Correction officers have one of the highest suicide rates in the country. So, dealing, that's incredibly traumatic for their fellow officers when that happens. And unfortunately, it's not rare. Another thing that happens often is sudden death because of heart attacks or strokes. The average life expectancy for a correction officer United States is 59 years. So, many correction officers are relatively young people. They either die at toward the end of their career or very soon after they retire. So, it's crucial as chaplains that we be sensitive to that. And even if we can't be schmoozing with them in front of the inmates or the prisoners, we want to make sure that we at least in some way show them maybe offsite, support or, help them find the resources they need.

Father George: Many of these men and women are hurting. They experience incredibly negative experiences daily. If not violence, at least the threat of violence in prison. They witness fighting, suicides of prisoners, blood, and horrible things. So, they're carrying around a lot. And I think it's imperative.

Now somebody wrote in the comment area: "As far as what happens to the story of a person who is experiencing loss, I find it helpful to present the concept of the risen Christ. He is unconditional love, present now, and in the future, and may offer a new path of action." This approach is very helpful! Yes, very much so! I think if we approach our work as Catholic prison chaplains and we're not grounded in the resurrection of Christ, then what are we doing?

Father George: you know, I think that's the good news we have to offer. Death, suffering, and loss are not the final story. The narrative continues. The narrative is one of the hope of resurrection. At the same time, I think we have to be careful not to go too quickly to that. So, we should not sugar coat the pain that people are going through. We cannot take away or try to diminish the natural experience of loss and the suffering that goes with it. But I think it's essential that we emphasize our faith. In Christ, there is victory over death. While we still go through suffering, it's not the end of the story for either them or their loved ones. So that's an excellent point.

Father George: Let's see this other comment now: "We talk a lot about the incarcerated in our area. We're finding that there is little being done to support the families who have been left behind. The greatest problem seems to be connecting with them and encouraging them to let others try to help." This person raises an excellent point. The families of prisoners, in a sense, are, are incarcerated as well. I get calls almost every day from mothers of men sent to prison at San Quentin. They are just freaking out because they don't know what's happening with their sons. They're worried about them. They are mothers; that's their job. So a lot of what I have to do is try to reassure them. I try to go talk to the man and say, "Listen, have you talked to your mom? You need to write or call her." We must do that.

And I don't know if you have any thoughts, Melissa. We probably touched on this issue when we taught the course at Boston College. It's hard. That's one of the problems I think that we need to be attentive to in the Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition (CPMC) - especially on our website. How do we connect people to the resources of helping families of prisoners? And any thoughts to add to these, Melissa?

Dr. Kelly: Well, I would add, as you know, George, I've, I teach a course at Boston college called pastoral care of the family. And one of the topics we take up, and you're a guest in our class by Skype, is the needs of families of the incarcerated. And I will say when I have researched, you know, church responses to families of the incarcerated nationally, there's quite a lot out there. I see many, many parishes of various denominations focused not only on the needs of the incarcerated but on their families. And I always feel, you know, none of us should spend time reinventing the wheel. So,

I think there are places out there doing this sort of work, and we can learn what they're doing and how it's working and borrow from them. So, there's much to be done as you are naming. There are many groups now working on this.

Father George: Yeah, that's true. Another participant now writes: "Types of loss are accumulative, especially for those who had been in prison for so long. They are institutionalized. The issue around becoming institutionalized is almost inevitable when you're dealing with people who are put in institutions like prisons. Prisons are totalitarian institutions. Decisions are made for them. They are disempowered. I'm wondering, how do those who experience this sort of loss of agency express grief differently from somebody on the outside? Can you share any thoughts on that?"

Dr. Kelly: Well, that's an interesting question. How would their expression of grief be different? You know, the short answer is, "I don't know." But, I can speculate if we go back to that idea of narrative and narrative disruption. To have lived in a setting where I have been stripped of the opportunity to live my, live my life in any sense, make my own decisions, eat when I want to eat, et cetera. You know, understanding how that has shaped my story, how I identify myself as a character in my own story, how I see the plot of my life, that could be helpful—and then exploring options within that. I can't change the setting if I'm a lifer. I can't change the context of my story. I may not be able to change much of the plot, but how could I maybe focus on myself as a character in some different ways? Maybe feel like I have a little bit more agency, but more hope could be a way to frame it.

Father George: Yeah, I think that is good. What's sad is how disempowering and dehumanizing the experience of long-term incarceration can be. And I believe that anything that helps or empowers people to have their own narrative is significant because the experience of prison has taken it away from them.

We're down to our last 10 minutes. So, if you have any burning questions, it's crucial to get them to us now. Please also feel free to share any of your experiences of what's worked for you. That's helpful because one of the things I'm hoping we can add to our website is resources that will address these issues that we're talking about today.

This training will be posted on our website. If you are listening to us in the future, you won't get to ask any questions or make comments. You will, however, be able to go to www.catholicprisonministries.org online and find helpful resources.

While you're with us, Melissa, do you have any suggestions for other resources for people to use in terms of literature, books out there that you would find helpful.

Dr. Kelly: You know, one of the areas that might sound a little odd in a webinar on grief and loss, but one of the areas that I find essential right now related to grief is the whole area of resilience.

Loss is inevitable. All of us are going to experience losses throughout, throughout life. Incarceration creates so much damage, and when facing loss after loss after loss, every one of us has to become as resilient as possible. And I think if there ever were a population that needs to be as resilient as possible, it would be those dealing with incarceration and their families.

There's so much work being done now on resilience in a variety of fields. There offers a unique opportunity for people in ministry to think about what are the resources of Christian faith that address resilience. It's, in a sense, it's all right there within the faith. What research is now showing us supports resilience.

Father George: Yeah, that's, that's a great point. Somebody else just wrote about the need for creating rituals for people who are not Catholic. And they ask if there's a way to do memorial services every six months in prison to remember those who have died. We do that at San Quentin. We do regular memorials for prisoners who have died. And it's extremely helpful there. They are interfaith or ecumenical services. We either do it in the Catholic or the Protestant chapel because we're lucky to have two separate chapels, but it doesn't matter. Anybody's welcome. We invite people to bring in prayers from their faith traditions.

This issue raises a few questions for me to ask you, Melissa. We are talking about Catholic prison ministry here. It's also crucial for us to be sensitive to and aware of other faiths and their approaches to grief and dying. Is there anything out there in the literature that can help us understand how people in other faith traditions grieve? Is there anything to help us better appreciate how different faith traditions, such as Judaism or Islam, understand death?

Dr. Kelly: Yes. People are very interested in right now in resources on religion, spirituality, and grief. So, I would say again, one of the best places to go would be the adec.org website of the Association for Death Education and Counseling. It's a virtual clearinghouse for much of this newer work that's being done. That would be my recommendation.

Father George: And one of our attendees writes: "I am presently using the book *Tear Soup, A Recipe for Healing After Loss* by Pat Schweigert and Chuck DeKlyen, et al. The book can be used with adults, children, and family members. And the story narrative describes grief."

That sounds like an excellent resource. Hopefully, the more we have access to people's experiences around working materials out there, the better that we can put them on a website. One of the things that I think is very helpful is working in small groups with people. Often, if you are in jail or prison and have a group of prisoners or detainees who have experienced loss, you can have bereavement groups. What do you think about that? Any further suggestions, Melissa?

Dr. Kelly: Well, I'm sure you've found this in your work too, George. But one thing that we have to keep in mind is some people do not find grief support groups at all helpful. And in fact, they can add to their distress. One of the things we often do in a grief support group is to encourage everybody to share and talk a lot about their feelings and their loss. And because everybody grieves in different ways that are not helpful to some people. It adds to their distress. But one thing that's often helpful in a grief support group is having something for everyone. So for those who need to be more active in their grief and just don't find it helpful to do a lot of processing of feelings to have sort of a task. They should think about what are the three ways I will try to take care of myself and my grief during the upcoming holidays? Holidays are often a difficult time for folks. So people get to be concrete; they get to be thinking rather than doing a lot of emoting but then create space for some expression of feelings too for folks who need that. But something for everyone rather than just sort of venting of feelings is often an excellent way to structure a group.

Father George: Good. Thank you. That's helpful.

Someone writes: "As chaplains, we are focused on the prisoners, correctional officers, and staff. Over time we do develop relationships with these individuals. Do you have any suggestions for chaplains on how we support one another and ensure we do self-care? To do so is critical when a prisoner or staff member may be dying. Do you have any comments on self-care and dealing with our grief or our sense of loss when we're around people who are going through their grief?"

Dr. Kelly: Well, so self-care is essential, you know, especially in these more challenging ministry settings. And I want to say that self-care is linked with resilience. That some people sometimes are a little hesitant to fully take on self-care because they don't have time or it feels self-indulgent or, or it's not their thing. Yet, if people want to be able to remain resilient in the work they feel called to do, they need to understand self-care is a means of cultivating resilience. This self-care will help them to continue to do the ministry.

Father George: I, we're down to our last couple of minutes, and so I think it's time to wind up. And I want to be sure to take a moment to give a plug for our next webinar, which will be on, Tuesday, July 9th at one o'clock Eastern time. I'll be sending out a link in the next week or so. And the topic of the upcoming webinar is how to create and sustain effective reentry programs for ex-prisoners. Our panelists will be sister Maureen Clark, who is the Catholic chaplain at MCI Framingham, the Massachusetts women's prison outside of Boston. And father Dustin, who is a prison chaplain and pastor in Northern Florida. And the founder of the recently opened Joseph House, which is a facility of re-entry for prisoners getting out of prison in Florida. And that's a vast area of need in our ministry. And so, and they're both people that I know.

Father George: Maureen was my first mentor when I was a Jesuit novice and a wonderful chaplain and just a wonderful person. And she's had a very successful re-entry program for the last 10 or 15 years at Framingham. Sister will share with us how she developed the program, what lessons she learned, what works, and what doesn't. And sir. And the same with Father Dustin, who has also done a lot of work around re-entry. So, looking forward to that. That'll be Tuesday, July 9th, at one o'clock Eastern time. And again, we'll send you out the link for that. And then in August, we are going to have another series of webinars on working with Spanish-speaking prisoners, immigrants, and detainees involved in the current situation in ICE and regular prisons and jails. So, a lot of good things are coming down the pike as well as our website for CPMC, which will be coming live in September. So, Dr. Kelly, thank you so much for being with us, Melissa. It's so great. I miss working with you at Boston College. Still, I'm thankful for the work you continue doing there, and thank you for all of you for attending, for staying with us and for the questions and comments you made. So, God bless, and we'll see you in July and God willing. Bye. Bye.

Recommended Questions for Reflection

1. What is the difference between grief and bereavement?
2. What are the six areas of loss, and what's an example of each type that incarcerated individuals might experience?
3. How does Dr. Kelley describe the area of grief work called "meaning making," and how does it help in our ministry to incarcerated men and women?
4. What should we as ministers do if we find ourselves making assumptions or conclusions about how someone is expressing grief?
5. How does Dr. Kelley describe the work of "continuing bonds" in contemporary grief work, and how is that method helpful in our jail/prison ministry?
6. What are some things we can do or facilitate to help an incarcerated person when they experience the death of a loved one?
7. What is "narrative disruption," and how might we help someone work through that disruption in an incarceration setting, whether as the victim or the offender (p. 12 and also p. 15)?

8. Why is it also important to be thoughtful to the mental and emotional wellbeing of guards and staff while we minister to incarcerated individuals?
 9. How is resilience related to our work with grief?
 10. Why is self-care so important for us as ministers, and how is self-care related to resilience, too?
-

Resources mentioned during the presentation:

1. ***All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care***, by Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, Westminster Press, Louisville, 1983.

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00SLHGTSQ/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1

Grief as a lifelong human experience is the scope of this absorbing book. Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson explore the multiple dimensions of the problem, including the origins and dynamics of grief, loss throughout life, caring for those who grieve, and the theology of grieving. This examination is enriched by vivid illustrations and case histories of individuals whose experiences the authors have shared.

2. **The Association for Death Education and Counseling®**, *The Thanatology Association®*, www.Adec.org is one of the oldest interdisciplinary organizations in the field of dying, death and bereavement. Its nearly 2,000 members include a wide array of psychologists, counselors, social workers, educators, researchers, hospice personnel, clergy, and volunteers.

The primary goal of ADEC is to enhance the ability of professionals to meet the needs of those with whom they work in death education and grief counseling.

3. **American Association of Suicidology** www.suicidology.org

The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) is a 501(c)3 non-profit association dedicated to the understanding and prevention of suicide.

4. ***Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss* Hardcover – June 1, 2005**

by [Pat Schwiebert](#) (Author), [Chuck DeKlyen](#) (Author), [Taylor Bills](#) (Illustrator)

https://smile.amazon.com/dp/0961519762/ref=rdr_ext_tmb

If you are going to buy only one book on grief, this is the one to get! It will validate your grief experience, and you can share it with your children. You can leave it on the coffee table so others will pick it up, read it, and then better appreciate your grieving time. Grand's Cooking Tips section at the back of the book is rich with wisdom and concrete recommendations. Better than a casserole!